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***“I couldn’t agree more, but ...”:***  
**agreeing to disagree in French and Australian English**

## **Introduction**

It has been shown that French speakers display what has been termed a “high-involvement style” (Tannen 2005) in interaction, with frequent use of interruptions, overlaps and disagreements (Béal 1993; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1990; Mullan 2006). Using selected excerpts of conversation, in this article I will analyse one of these interactional features - disagreements - through Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness (1987), and the framework of Conversation Analysis, and illustrate how both of these are problematical when attempting to deal universally with disagreements.

Previous studies have shown that, whereas English speakers view disagreement as a kind of personal criticism which attacks their opinion (Fitzgerald 2003; Wierzbicka 2002), French speakers consider disagreement an important exchange of ideas which affirms your relationship with your interlocutor (Béal 1993; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1990). It goes without saying that such opposing interactional styles often cause misunderstandings, which can in turn lead to negative stereotyping.

Taking both a comparative and an intercultural approach, this paper will examine three short excerpts of conversation recorded between 2000 and 2002 in Australia: the first between two native speakers of Australian English; the second between two native speakers of French; and the third between a native Australian English speaker and a native French speaker speaking English. The data will demonstrate that disagreements are not viewed or managed interactionally in the same way by French and Australian English speakers.

## **1. Conversation Analysis**

Conversation Analysis (CA) is the study of recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction, where the principle aim is to discover how participants understand and respond to each other’s turns, with the main focus on sequences of actions. I will not attempt a detailed description of CA in this section, but limit myself to the concepts most salient to this discussion.

CA has several central interactional organisation concepts:

- a. *Turn-taking*: conventions dictate that “overwhelmingly one party talks at a time” (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974: 700-701).
- b. *Adjacency pairs*: turn-taking sets up a system of utterances produced by the speakers alternately, where certain utterances generally occur in pairs.

- c. *Preference and (dis)preferred responses* refer to the second pair part of an adjacency pair. For example, an invitation requires a response in the form of an acceptance or a decline, where the preferred response would be acceptance. This concept of *preference* does not refer to the psychological disposition of the speaker, but to the structural feature of the sequential organisation of the adjacency pair (Bilmes 1988), where the preferred response is the unmarked one. It has been found that preferred second pair parts are generally performed contiguously and without mitigation (cf. Sacks 1987), whereas dispreferred responses such as refusals or disagreements tend to be delayed, prefaced by hesitations and discourse markers like *well...*, and qualified (Pomerantz 1984: 72, 77).
- d. *Recipient-design*: the way "... in which the talk ... is constructed or designed in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the ... co-participants" (Sacks et al. 1974: 727).
- e. *Repair*: corrections of what participants perceive as problems in speech.

In the framework of CA, it is the concept of preference, and preferred or dispreferred responses, which deals with disagreements. According to Pomerantz, agreement is preferred and disagreement is dispreferred, and "conversants orient to agreeing with one another as comfortable, supportive, reinforcing, perhaps as being sociable and as showing that they are like-minded", whereas "conversants orient to their disagreeing with one another as uncomfortable, unpleasant, difficult, risking threat, insult or offense" (1984: 77). (This of course refers to English conversation, and more specifically to American English.)<sup>1</sup>

It has been noted that dispreferred responses in English are typically longer than preferred responses because they are usually prefaced with hedges such as *ah*, *well*, pauses, hesitations etc. (Pomerantz 1984: 72, 77), with the actual disagreement often buried deep into the turn (Sacks 1987: 58) - cf. the common preface to a disagreement "*I couldn't agree more but ...*". Lüger (1999: 139) feels that disagreement in French is a dispreferred response, although he concedes that this does not mean that one would refrain from expressing an opposing point of view, but that a range of minimising strategies are required to avoid offending one's interlocutor. Kerbrat-Orecchioni agrees that "*le désaccord est toujours une offense conversationnelle*" (1987: 334), which one is obliged to justify.

In my data however,<sup>2</sup> this was not always found to be the case, as the disagreements in my French data were frequently unmitigated (examples (i) and (ii) or only partially mitigated

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Renwick claims that Americans derive their sense of self by acting "in accord with" others, while Australians like to disagree and affirm their sense of identity by acting in opposition to others (1991: 22). This may be so, but as we shall see, disagreements in Australian English must follow certain interactional conventions.

<sup>2</sup> Notes on the data:

All examples are taken from the same corpus collected between 2000 and 2002, and are quoted in the original language.

Transcription conventions are detailed at the end of this article.

Examples (i) to (ix) are included here as quotations for their content only, rather than to illustrate particular interactional strategies, and have been given standard punctuation for ease of readability.

with a brief acknowledgement of the interlocutor's position before expressing a different perspective ("oui mais", example (iii)):

- (i) Irène:<sup>3</sup> *Non, c'est pas vrai!* (see example (2) lines 31, 33)
- (ii) Irène: ... en France ou a Paris, où c'est quand même plus difficile d'avoir =  
Guillaume: = *Mais la France ce n'est pas que Paris!*
- (iii) Pauline: .... si tu .. ce que tu dis c'est marrant et tout, eh ben alors t'es un [pote]  
Vincent: [oui]  
*mais* ça c'est dans le contexte euh .. qui est ... qui est hors des-- des études euh =  
Pauline: = *oui mais je crois que* ça serait plus ou moins la même chose au travail  
....
- (iv) Darren: .... e::t, bon, et ça -- bon c'est -- c'est un exemple un peu extrême peut-être euh, ... quand les Français disent le -- la vérité ça peut être blessant, aux autres. =  
Carine: = *mais je sais pas si c'est typique des Français de dire la vérité.* moi je connais des Français qui pffft- qui ne vont rien dire. *je crois que c'est une question de personnalité.*  
.  
.  
.  
Carine: .... *donc je suis un peu étonnée de ce que tu dis.* (1.0) qu'ils disent franchement à un ami, ah euh t'es mal habillé aujourd'hui, ou des choses comme ça. ... c'est à dire ça c'est des choses qu'on peut dire à quelqu'un qu'on connaît bien.  
Darren: mm.  
Carine: *je sais pas, j- c'est pas une question d'être français anglais allemand.* (1.5) *je pense qu'on trouve ça partout.*

While Carine's statements in example (iv) include what could initially be considered mitigators (*je sais pas, je crois que, je suis un peu étonnée de ce que tu dis, je pense que*), her rather defensive intonation in fact clearly marks these as a definite expression of her opinion rather than as hedges. Darren has brought up the topic of the French tendency for sincerity sometimes offending other cultures, and Carine immediately jumps to the defence of her race, by saying that she does not know if that is typical of the French.

This is supported by the fact that her initial disagreement begins with *mais* which clearly marks a contrast with the previous statement. *Je crois que c'est une question de personnalité* is an example of *je crois* used to mark a different perspective from the prior turn (cf. Mullan 2006). Carine's second instance of *je sais pas* precedes what can be assumed to be a truncated *je*, which is then followed by a clear unmitigated statement of disagreement: *c'est pas une question d'être français anglais allemand*. The level and

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For the same reason I have chosen to use standard English and French spelling, rather than a phonetic representation.

Line numbers appear in examples (1) to (3) which represent the analysis of the data, but do not appear in examples (i) to (ix).

<sup>3</sup> All participant names are pseudonyms.

unreduced phonology of the following *je pense qu'on trouve ça partout* signals Carine's opinion, and sums up what she has said before, i.e. that it is a question of personality.

The high frequency with which disagreements were found to occur in my data also supports the fact that they cannot uniformly be considered dispreferred responses in French, and is further evidence of the positive evaluation of disagreements in French interactional style. Kakavá (1993a, 1993b) also found that disagreements do not often display what she refers to as "dispreference markers" in casual conversation among Greeks, and a similar finding is detailed in Kotthoff (1993) for conversations among Chinese and German speakers.

Although CA does not purport to be a universal framework for interactional organisation, given that it was initially based on and applied to American English interactions (although it is increasing its application to other languages), it is hardly surprising that this framework may not be applicable to other cultures' interactional styles. Examples (1) to (3) will illustrate how the central CA concept of preference and (dis)preferred responses differs for French and Australian English interactional styles.

## **2. Brown and Levinson**

Brown and Levinson's well known theory of politeness undoubtedly requires very little by way of explanation here. The reader will already be familiar with Goffman's (1967) concept of face, which Brown and Levinson define as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987: 61). The authors divide this notion of face into positive and negative face, both considered basic needs of the individual in social interaction.

According to this theory, certain speech acts threaten the interlocutor's face however. For example, a disagreement will threaten one's positive face by suggesting that the other's point of view is incorrect, indicating that the speaker is "wrong, misguided or unreasonable about some issue, such wrongness being associated with disapproval" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 66).

There is clearly a link between the sequential organisational nature of CA and Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, and indeed, Brown and Levinson discuss this in some detail (1987: 38-43). In particular, the CA concept of preference is related to face considerations and face threatening acts. Disagreements would be considered both face threatening acts for Brown and Levinson, and dispreferred responses for Conversation Analysts. In CA a dispreferred response such as a disagreement would usually be prefaced by hesitation or a discourse marker, "displaying reluctance and discomfort" (Pomerantz: 1984: 72). In Brown and Levinson's politeness theory this is seen as performing the act "on record" with an appropriate visible politeness strategy, i.e. redressive action which "gives face" to the addressee, by counteracting the potential face threat and thereby indicating that no face threat is intended (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69-70).

It is well known that the universality of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness has been challenged many times in the past (cf. for example Matsumoto 1988; Sifianou 1992), and it is now generally accepted that their communicative principles are in fact subject to substantial variation across cultures. It will also be argued here that disagreements do not

present a face threat for French speakers in the same way as for Australian English speakers.

### 3. Disagreements

*Pour les Anglo-Saxons .... la “relation” est plus importante que le “contenu”; l’essentiel, c’est d’éviter les pommes de discorde, et de désamorcer les conflits potentiels, pour ne pas mettre en péril l’interaction. Pour les peuples ... méditerranéens (Français compris), l’essentiel est la confrontation des points de vue, et l’affirmation du sien propre, même si le prix à payer est le risque d’affrontement ....*

(Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1995: 36)

According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1990: 83-86), France can be considered a society with a confrontational ethos - one which tolerates, and even welcomes, conflict; consensus is generally considered “*mou*” (idem). Béal suggests that consensus is not well regarded in France because it implies either that the speaker is not expressing his or her objection(s), or is not thoroughly defending his or her point of view (1993: 102). Expressing sincere opinions is important and desirable, and if this leads to disagreement so much the better, as this fuels the conversation and keeps it going (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1990: 83-86).

Two of the French participants in my study reiterated the importance of defending one’s views, while emphasising the value of listening to others’ views and thereby creating an *exchange*:

- (v) Bernadette: ... il y a certaine choses à laquelle { sic } je crois énormément fermement et là je pourrais débattre e::t =  
Céline: = voilà  
Bernadette: et et défendre mon steak  
Céline: [oui c'est ça oui]  
Bernadette: [comme on dit c'est] une ... très bonne expression française on défend son steak  
Céline: mm mm  
Bernadette: [MAIS EUH]  
Céline: [il faut avoir] des croyances très fortes  
Bernadette: [oui]  
Céline: [et aus]si les.. être tellement persuadée qu'elles sont .. elles sont ... elles sont bonnes et essayer de les .. les faire partager aux autres  
Bernadette: mais [pou]voir  
Céline: [mais]  
Bernadette: .. avoir la possibilité de:: ... d'écouter les autres ... et de ne pas se braquer  
Céline: oui voi[là oui]  
Bernadette: [pas pas] forcément changer parce que je pense [que si]  
Céline: [mm mm]  
Bernadette: on croit quelque chose c'est qu'on a des raisons personnelles ... euh mais de .. moi .. moi je connais des gens ils ont des opinions ça c'est sûr qu'ils ont des opinions mais ils vont rien entendre  
Céline: ah oui [voilà ... oui ... ils .. ils]  
Bernadette: [ils vont rien entendre et] ils [vont]  
Céline: [mm mm]  
Bernadette: ces des gens .. bornés sur des opinions ... et la conversation est fermée  
Céline: voilà ouais

Bernadette: avoir des opinions c'est bien mais il faut pouvoir être interchangeable ..  
pouvoir [être ouvert]  
Céline: [et écouter celles] des autres mm  
Bernadette: voilà  
Céline: mm mm  
Bernadette: sin[on c'est .. c-]  
Céline: [parce que c'est sinon c'est]  
Bernadette: ça appor- y'a .. y'a aucun échange

Where expressing one's opinion is extremely important for French speakers, this is not necessarily the case for Australian English speakers. While some Australians do of course view the expression of opinions as important, this must be done within certain limitations: opinions must not be presented as fact, and they must not be imposed on others (Wierzbicka 2006: 54). As Wierzbicka points out (idem.: 55), these concepts are connected; by overtly marking a statement as our own opinion we are emphasising that it is not fact, and at the same time we are acknowledging that our interlocutor might not be of the same opinion (and has a perfect right not to be). Schiffrin sees opinions as “free[ing] the speaker .... from a claim to truth” since they are unverifiable, subjective views - and therefore unavailable for proof - and so “another's right to doubt the validity of an opinion cannot be denied” (1990: 245, 248).

For French speakers however, the emphasis is not so much on *tolerating* different opinions, as on *encouraging* them, with a view to creating an exchange. This attitude can be seen in the following comments from two of my French participants:

- (vi) Suzanne: the other day I had a .. um an American girl in my class, and she said that French are very political, and I completely agree with that. we.. *we love to debate about things and, and argue, like nicely, but like argue, but like giving you my point of view and give me your arguments* and we are going to debate all that .. you know it's something we love to do .. like we're having a good dinner that will last for three hours, and eat a lot and drink a lot and just, you know, invent a new better world and.. *share our ideas..* and yeah it's true that we love to do that um.. a typical French person.
- (vii) Carine: donc c'est vrai que c'est pour ça *en France on adore débattre*, il y a pas mal d'émissions de débat à la télé. ici pas tellement. donc on adore, on prend n'importe quel sujet et on peut en parler euh des heures et des heures, *parce qu'en fonction des opinions, il y a .. il y a tellement de choses différentes à dire.*

An Anglo-Saxon observing French people in conversation is often struck by the volume, the interruptions, and the intense “arguing”. As reiterated by Steele, “all participants are expected to express their opinions frankly and to defend them when someone disagrees. Intelligent disagreement can be one of the main pleasures of conversation, even between closest friends” (1995: 18). Steele's use of the word *even* here is particularly significant, as it betrays his Anglo viewpoint. A French speaker might in fact replace the word *even* with *especially*; not only can friendships withstand differing opinions and disagreement, but it shows a willingness for honesty and a respect for the other person that you are prepared to speak your mind and share your point of view with them.

We have seen that this is not the case for English speakers however, who often see disagreement as a kind of personal criticism which attacks their opinion - even for some intimates (cf. example (viii) below); Fitzgerald remarks that criticism should be impersonal (2003: 138). Wierzbicka also discusses this in her article on *right* and *wrong*, pointing out that for English speakers, it is unacceptable to say to someone “you’re wrong” (2002: 140), since freedom of expression is more important than denouncing someone’s opinion as wrong (idem: 246). One of my Australian participants made the following reflection on this:

- (viii) Kylie: my parents go to the movies a lot, and @ my mum just loves everything she goes to, and sometimes Dad will be honest and say *I didn’t like it*, and it’s like he’s said to her *I don’t like you* ... she takes it so personally .. that he might not like a movie.

In another conversation, the participants had been discussing the meaning of the term *opinionated*:

- (ix) Natalie: *I think Australians are quite um ... uncomfortable with disagreeing with each other. like openly arguing about things?*  
 Ken: yeah. [yeah.]  
 Natalie: [you know like,] I don’t know about Asian cultures,<sup>4</sup> whether or not that they say anything means that you don’t tend to engage in that, but I think Europeans um ... (1.5), there’s a l- a lot less -- it’s not personally offensive to say I disagree with you about this issue, w- *whereas*, ... (2.5) *I think we’re quite uncomfortable with conflict? about issues?*  
 .  
 .  
 .  
 Natalie: *I think that’s a really common Australian, sort of response to, .. kind of, ... a moment of conflict, or, um something unconf- like, uncomfortable is to ..*  
 Ken: *they want to change the topic.* [yeah.]  
 Natalie: [yeah,] *change it but make a bit of a joke about it, and make it into something frivolous?* [‘cos]  
 Ken: [yeah.]  
 Natalie: *that’s a really good, [sort of,]*  
 Ken: [yeah, yeah, yeah.]  
 Natalie: *social tactic? and um, and I just thought well, that’s really interesting, ‘cos I don’t know whether this is my own particular stereotype about Europeans, but I think that, you know, in the main -- you would -- like, people would probably feel a little less uncomfortable, and, like, compelled to move the topic on? they might be a bit happier just for people to -- for it to be okay that’s there’s conflict, and to be okay that people have differing views and .. and stuff. whereas I think, you know, part of our kind of ... (2.0) our culture is, ... (1.0) that we’re not particularly comfortable with that, and .....*

In the three minutes of further discussion not reproduced here in the middle of this discussion, Ken says that he would be uncomfortable if someone told him that “*his idea or approach was rubbish*”. He goes on to say: “*if ... they said oh I just don’t think your approach or idea is the way to go then I would .. I’d probably take it on the chin*”,

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<sup>4</sup> This is a reference to Ken’s Asian background (see footnote 5).



suggesting that the use of *don't think* here as a mitigator or negative politeness marker would make a disagreement more acceptable for him.

Traverso argues something similar for French speakers. While she considers disagreement “indispensable”, she points out that at the same time it can be dangerous to the interaction and the relationship, because it can suggest that the previous speaker’s point of view was false or uninteresting (1996: 164-165). Kerbrat-Orecchioni believes that as such, all disagreements are marked and often accompanied by statements like “*ce n’est pas pour te contredire, mais...*” (1990: 152). Lüger also claims that expressions of disagreement such as “*non, c’est faux*”, “*absolument pas*”, and “*rien de plus faux*” are not normal formulas, rather they are extremely marked (1999: 140). While I acknowledge that French speakers do often mitigate their disagreements, this is not always the case, since as I will illustrate through the analysis of authentic data, disagreements do not present a face threat for French speakers in the same way as for English speakers. Neither can they be considered dispreferred responses to the same extent as they are in English.

### 3. Data and analysis

The excerpts below are taken from three separate conversations of approximately forty five minutes each, recorded in Australia between August 2000 and September 2002 as part of a larger study. The participants were either natives of France, or Australians who identify as “Anglo-Australian”.<sup>5</sup> Of the two English conversations, the participants consist of one pair of native general Australian English speakers (example (1)),<sup>6</sup> and one Australian with a French speaker (example (3)); while the French conversation was made up of a pair of native standard French speakers (example (2)).<sup>7</sup>

The participants were chosen on the basis of the length of time they had spent in Australia or France, as it is generally agreed that this is a factor which can affect interactional style. It is clear that after an extended period in a foreign country where one speaks the target language, one’s interactional style (in the first, as well as in the target language) could be affected. All participants had spent less than two years (sometimes no time at all) in the country where their second language is spoken.

Another important influence on interactional style is obviously the relationship between the interlocutors; clearly the level of intimacy will affect the interactional norms. For this reason, the participants were also chosen on the basis that none of them knew each other well: Heather and Marie were complete strangers meeting for the first time; Guillaume and Irène were colleagues working for the same organisation but in different areas, and had only met each other ten days earlier; and Ken and Natalie were students in the same French class who had spent twelve and a half hours together in class over a ten week period prior to the recording. It should be made clear that the interactional norms and

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<sup>5</sup> One of the Australian participants was of Malaysian background, but considers himself “totally” Australian, having been born and raised in Australia, and speaking only English, and not the first language of his parents.

<sup>6</sup> It is generally agreed that there are three main types of Australian English: broad, general and cultivated, and that these are largely distinguished on the basis of vowel pronunciation.

<sup>7</sup> Hansen defines standard French as “the kind which is spoken by educated Parisian speakers and which exhibits no noticeable regional or social characteristics” (1997: 154). While this may seem a narrow definition, it is representative of the French spoken by these participants.

disagreement strategies discussed here relate to those executed between relative strangers only.

While I was present at the recording of the conversations, my participation was limited to asking questions on certain topics to initiate the conversation between the two speakers, and to adding comments from time to time. The participants were asked to talk to each other rather than to me, although I was often included in the conversation. This is similar to what Wolfson describes as a spontaneous interview, where the participant is asked a few questions and then encouraged to develop further a topic of interest, and engage in informal conversation (1997: 120), although these recordings differ in the sense that they consist of two participants and myself as researcher.

The first two extracts below illustrate instances of disagreements in native speaker Australian English and French interaction respectively; the third extract illustrates a disagreement between an Australian and a French speaker. In the first example Natalie is replying to a question I asked the participants regarding what they didn't like about Australia. She has just talked about the isolation of the country:

(1) 1 :49min  
**Ken = Australian**  
**Natalie = Australian**

- 1 Natalie: ... (3.5) yea:h and I guess too, like I am sort of .. personally
- 2 embarrassed by the racism in this country, which I don't think is
- 3 necessarily -- ^doesn't exist everywhere ^else<sup>8</sup>, but I think that our
- 4 {noise}, sort of, form of ..., you know, I'm embarrassed that as a
- 5 nation we can't um .. recognise the rights for indigenous people,
- 6 [whereas a lot of]
- 7 Ken: [(Hx) **ye::ah true.** (Hx)]
- 8 Natalie: other countries ... have ... been able to do that better.
- 9 Ken: **that's .. t: rue to a certain extent, .. ^I've -- I've actually found**
- 10 **that ... in fact we're ... not as ... (H) (2.0) racially divisive, or ..**
- 11 **whatever you want to call it, .. or racist in ..<sup>9</sup> other parts of the**
- 12 **world, in fact I think ... (Hx) um (Hx) .. most °sort of° (H) --**
- 13 **I'm in trouble here ... for generalising, but ^most ... ^Asian ..**
- 14 **um, ^countries ... (1.0) are °quite° ... racist,**
- 15 Natalie: yeah,
- 16 Ken: they have racist **um** ... (2.5) (H) upbringing, **if you like, .. and**
- 17 **even politically it's -- it's quite that way, ... (1.0) um, .. I c- I can**
- 18 **name a few in terms of like the -- this -- ... w- um ... (1.5), the**
- 19 **stuff that's happening in Indonesia,**
- 20 Natalie: yeah, [exactly,]
- 21 Ken: [and even] in Malaysia with ..
- 22 Natalie: yep. =
- 23 Ken: = **you know**, some of the politicians, and ..
- 24 Natalie: °yeah°, East Timor is t- yeah, .. yeah that's [true.]
- 25 Ken: [SO I--] **IThINK ...**
- 26 **OVERALL we're th- ... I don't think we're that racist, and**
- 27 **that's the great thing about it, ... the country's so welcoming of**

8 Natalie seems to mean to say something else here: either that racism doesn't exist everywhere (in Australia), or that she doesn't mean that racism doesn't exist everywhere else (in the world).

<sup>9</sup> It seems logical to assume that Ken meant to say *as* here.

28                    **um** different ... races -- race, yeah.  
 29    Natalie:        yep.

This example illustrates many of the features typically associated with disagreements and other dispreferred responses in English conversation. Firstly, the slow pace of Ken's utterances is quite striking. While Ken does tend to consider his remarks somewhat throughout this whole conversation, the frequency of - and length of - the pauses and hesitations in this excerpt is exceptional. There are nine instances of a break in rhythm of less than 0.3 seconds (represented by two dots), sixteen pauses of between 0.3 and 0.9 seconds (represented by three dots), as well as five instances of timed pauses varying in length from 1 second to 2.5 seconds; these timed pauses are all considered to be very long in ordinary interaction, where a pause of five tenths of a second would normally be interpreted as signalling turn-exchange in American English (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1996: 71).<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the pauses, the extended length of the vowel in *ye::ah true* (line 7) displays Ken's reluctance to agree, while at the same time also displaying his reluctance to disagree, which he goes on to do, by first acknowledging the truth of Natalie's statement. Ken then goes on to qualify his agreement, by saying that it is true "to a certain extent" (line 9) - again, with an extended sound in *t:rue* - and continuing with his own view.

Overall, the disagreement turn is quite long (made even longer by the length of the pauses), with the actual disagreement occurring quite some way into the turn: *I've -- I've actually found that ... in fact we're ... not as ... (H) (2.0) racially divisive* (lines 9-10), with an inhalation and a pause of 2 seconds before the words "racially divisive". There are also a number of truncated intonation units in this segment (lines 9, 12, 17 (twice), 18 (three times), 25, 26, 28), as well as some repetition and self-repair following some of these truncations. This is a typical example of a dispreferred response in English.

Both dispreferred responses and face threatening acts typically contain hedges and other negative politeness strategies, such as apologies. Ken employs a number of hedges: *to a certain extent, actually* (line 9), *in fact* (line 10), *or whatever you want to call it* (lines 10-11), *in fact I think, sort of* (line 12), *quite* (line 14), *if you like* (line 16), *quite* (line 17) *you know* (line 23), *I think ... overall, I don't think we're that racist* (lines 26-27). He also offers a kind of apology in *I'm in trouble here ... for generalising* (line 13) when proposing his argument concerning Asian countries.

Interestingly, Natalie's own opening statement offering her opinion also contains a number of pauses, hesitation markers and hedging devices: *I guess, like, sort of, personally* (line 1), *I don't think* (line 2), *necessarily, I think* (line 3), *sort of, you know* (line 4), *um* (line 5). Using such hedges to mitigate one's viewpoint supports the earlier observation that opinions must not be imposed on one's interlocutor and must be presented as opinions rather than facts in Australian English interaction (cf. Natalie's use of the word *personally*).

Whilst it could be argued that Natalie perhaps considered racism a somewhat controversial topic which is directly relevant to the speakers - especially given that Ken is of Malaysian

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<sup>10</sup> This is in contrast to French conversation, where a pause of only three tenths of a second would usually signal turn-exchange (*idem*).

origin - this subject was of her own choosing. It is of course also possible that this somewhat delicate topic of racism may have contributed in some way to the slow pace and hesitancy of this extract in particular. However, these interactional features were by no means restricted to this extract alone, but all occurred frequently throughout the data, and were performed by a number of different Australian English speakers. Overall, this is a typical example of an Australian English speaker expressing their opinion while complying with the afore-mentioned interactional “rules”.

The second extract illustrates some marked differences in interactional style from the previous example. It begins with a question addressed to both participants (both native French speakers).

(2) 1.07 min

Guillaume = French

Irène = French

- 1 Kerry: c'est plus important d'être sincère que d'être poli?
- 2 Irène: ah, je crois qu'il est -- le mieux [c'est d'arriver --]
- 3 Kerry: [si quelqu'un --] =
- 4 Guillaume: = ah oui ouais
- 5 ouais. =
- 6 Irène: = je pense qu'on peut arriver à jouer les deux, en étant honnête,
- 7 tu peux tout à fait euh .. arriver à être poli, c'est ça l- la- l'avantage. tu
- 8 peux arriver à être poli et alors tu es complètement hypocrite sans
- 9 problème, (H) mais je pense que justement en jouant la carte de
- 10 l'honnêteté il y a une manière, une certaine diplomatie, et tu ^peux
- 11 rester poli. c'est ça que j'aime beaucoup.
- 12 Guillaume: ouais, l'honnêteté euh ... la pol- la poli- la politesse, ça peut ^changer.
- 13 on peut devenir poli.
- 14 Irène: ouais.
- 15 Guillaume: ben l'honnêteté eu:h, il faut des années d'expérience euh, (H) .. euh ..
- 16 gé- c'est ... génétique, l'honnêteté ça doit être génétique, la politesse
- 17 euh, on peut te faire une piqûre.
- 18 Irène: [ @ @ @ ]
- 19 Kerry: [ @ @ @ ]
- 20 Guillaume: hein?
- 21 Irène: ben [( ??? )]
- 22 Guillaume: [l'honnêteté] c'est génétique ouais. =
- 23 Irène: = moi je pense que le bon compro[mis] --
- 24 Guillaume: [ça] ^doit être génétique]
- 25 Irène: [ouais,] non .. le bon compromis c'est la
- 26 diplomatie de toute manière, ça c'est sûr. non ce côté là euh, ouais. =
- 27 Guillaume: = **mais** ↓ **non**.
- 28 Irène: **si!** =
- 29 Guillaume: = **ça va pas**, la diplomatie, il y a pas plus euh ... il y a pas plus euh
- 30 ... ^MENTEU :::R, =
- 31 Irène: = **non c'est pas vrai**. =
- 32 Guillaume: = ^VOL[EU :::R],
- 33 Irène: [non] c'est pas [vrai.]
- 34 Guillaume: [qu'un] diplomate il va te faire avaler les
- couleuvres, =
- 35 Irène: = **non** la diplomatie [(???) --]
- 36 Guillaume: [oh] viendez, viendez, viendez, viendez, ks ks ks,

- 37 Irène: **non, [non,]**  
 38 Guillaume: [tu] sais le serpent dans [euh .. au]  
 39 Irène: [( ???) disais] ouais ouais.  
 40 Guillaume: Livre de la [Jungle],  
 41 Irène: [Jungle].  
 42 Guillaume: “trust [in me....”] [{sings}]  
 43 Irène: [{sings}] [( ???) en français “faites-moi confiance” {sings}]  
 44 Guillaume: [**non non non** et tout ça pour te becter] ... **tu rigoles**  
 45 **ou quoi.**  
 46 Irène: **non** j’ai le -- **non non** la diplomatie, je -- justement en tant que pauvre  
 47 stagiaire euh,  
 48 Guillaume: ah!<sup>11</sup>

The most immediately noticeable difference between this and the previous example is the different dynamics of the exchanges and the rapid pace at which this exchange was executed. This extract of 48 lines took place in one minute and seven seconds, whereas the previous exchange of 29 lines between Ken and Natalie took one minute forty nine seconds. Of course turn length per se is meaningless, as it is not comparable between the two examples, but this in itself is highly indicative of the general difference in interactional style between these French and Australian English speakers. In the first example, the speakers take longer turns with few overlaps or latching, while the exchange between Guillaume and Irène consists of a higher number of what are generally shorter turns, but more rapid responses with frequent overlaps and latching, and what Béal has called “verbal duelling” (1994: 78-79).

As soon as I ask the question, both Irène and Guillaume respond with their answers. Irène takes the floor first in lines 6-11 to explain that she thinks that by being diplomatic one can be honest and polite at the same time. Guillaume goes on to say that it takes years of experience to be honest, whereas one can become polite. He then makes a joke about honesty being genetic, whereas one can be injected with politeness (lines 12-17). There then follows an exchange where both Irène and Guillaume repeat their opinions (lines 22-26). When Irène returns to her earlier statement (lines 25-26) *non .. le bon compromis c’est la diplomatie de toute manière, ça c’est sûr. non ce côté-la euh, ouais* Guillaume disagrees emphatically and without mitigation: *mais ↯non* (line 27).

This initiates a disagreement about diplomacy over several turns (lines 27-46), which includes ten unmitigated utterances of disagreement: *mais non* (referred to above); *si* (line 28); *ça va pas* (line 29); two instances of *non c’est pas vrai* (lines 31, 33); four instances of *non* repeated up to three times (lines 35, 37, 44, 46); *tu rigoles ou quoi* (lines 44-45). There are no instances of pauses, hesitation markers, hedges or negative politeness strategies in this segment (or indeed the entire extract), thereby indicating that neither participant viewed any part of this exchange as a face threatening act, either to themselves or their interlocutor.

While it could be argued that this extract may not be typical of all French speakers, and it must be acknowledged that Irène and Guillaume obviously got on well enough for their relationship to withstand such unmitigated disagreements,<sup>12</sup> it must also be reiterated that

<sup>11</sup> A longer version of this example appeared in Mullan 2002: 27-28.

<sup>12</sup> The topic is also perhaps not as delicate and directly relevant to the speakers as in the first example, and can therefore be dealt with in a more light-hearted manner.

these participants had met only at work ten days previously and had not spent an enormous amount of time together. Therefore, I have included this example as a contrast to the first extract in this section, where the participants had known each other for ten weeks, spending twelve hours together in class, and having socialised after class as a group on a few occasions. The examples illustrate the distinct interactional styles of these French and Australian English speakers in comparable relationships.

I am certainly not suggesting that all French speakers interact in this way - nor that no Australian English speakers would ever interact this way; clearly no one conversation is ever representative of anything more than just that. As Goddard says (1997: 199):

Cultural norms may be followed by some of the people all of the time, and by all of the people some of the time, but they are certainly not followed by all of the people all of the time. Whether or not they are being followed in behavioural terms, however, cultural norms are always in the background as an interpretive framework against which people make sense of and access other people's behaviours.

This is what is meant by 'normative' activities in CA, where interlocutors infer a certain meaning in the case of a departure from normative interactional procedures. The reason for this is that we have certain expectations of our interlocutor according to the discourse norms of our own culture. However, the fact that such unmitigated disagreements are permitted in French interactional style - and that not only did neither party take offence here, but that Irène joined in with Guillaume's song while he was disagreeing with her before going back to their verbal duelling - suggests that disagreements are not considered face threatening acts or dispreferred responses to the same extent as for Australian English speakers.

The final example is particularly interesting from a cross-cultural perspective because it involves a French speaker and an Australian English speaker together, and illustrates the distinct disagreement management strategies discussed above, in further support of the previous examples. The following extract occurs approximately two minutes into the conversation, where Heather and Marie had met only a few minutes before the recording began.

(3)            2 :54 min  
**Heather = Australian**  
**Marie = French**

- |    |          |  |
|----|----------|--|
| 1  | Kerry:   | okay, so you obviously erm, consider honesty as                          |
| 2  |          | [{ <i>coughin</i> }g]  |
| 3  | Kerry:   | [being really im]portant in a relationship, do you think it's ..         |
| 4  |          | more important to be honest, or truthful, .. than it is to be polite.    |
| 5  | Marie:   | ... (1.0) ah. to me, ^yes. definitely. @@@                               |
| 6  | Heather: | <b>erm, oh I don't know, it would depend. I don't --</b>                 |
| 7  | Marie:   | [mm hm,]   |
| 8  | Heather: | <b>[think] I could say absolutely. ... in in -- well it would depend</b> |
| 9  |          | <b>on the relationship, who the person is, how close they are to</b>     |
| 10 |          | <b>me? (H) as to erm ... (1.5) [a] --</b>                                |
| 11 | Marie:   | <b>[I] -- I -- I was sure you would</b>                                  |
| 12 |          | <b>disagree with me. (H) I -- I wonder sometimes why people think</b>    |

13 we are ^arrogant, and I guess, one of the thing is p'rap<sup>13</sup> that -- ah  
14 sometimes people can think I'm a bit pushy or arrogant, because  
15 ... I don't care about being polite,  
16 Heather: [mm,]  
17 Marie: [I think] being sincere ^is a way of [being polite.]  
18 [{{coughing}}]  
19 Heather: mm,  
20 Marie: I  
21 [{{coughing}}]  
22 Marie: [want people] to be sincere with me, I've never -- I've been  
23 raised in er cultural, from my mum, and my dad, we've got the  
24 noble part, that is very, you know, we learn the rules, na na na,  
25 Heather: yes,  
26 Marie: and my dad is -- well another story, but it's kind of the same  
27 thing? erm, being polite is very important? and I just ... (1.0)  
28 {say / think}[fuck off.]  
29 Heather: [you don't --] [yeah.]  
30 Marie: [sorry,] but I -- because it's ... like  
31 being false all the time. and [I --]  
32 Heather: [mm,]  
33 Marie: ... I've been going through that, and sometimes ... (1.0) people  
34 don't °under°^stand,  
35 Heather: mm,  
36 Marie: but it doesn't matter to me.  
37 Heather: **yeah, well -- ... it would depend on the circumstances?**  
38 Marie: yeah,  
39 Heather: **with me**, because sometimes I think .. if by being polite I  
40 don't -- I stop somebody being ^hurt,  
41 Marie: mm, [yeah,]  
42 Heather: [then] I will be polite, rather [than]  
43 Marie: [uhuh,]  
44 Heather: .. tell them what I really think?  
45 Marie: mm,  
46 Heather: because I think that .. w- what I really think, a) isn't that  
47 im^portant to them,  
48 Marie: [yeah,]  
49 Heather: [it's not] that important for them to know it,  
50 Marie: mm,  
51 Heather: particularly if I think it will hurt them? so I don't think there's  
52 anything to be gained, (H) so sometimes I will be -- **well, our**  
53 **version of polite, =**  
54 Marie: = polite °yeah°,  
55 Heather: because I think it might hurt someone.  
56 Marie: mm, [tactful .. perhaps.]  
57 Heather: [and I don't want to do that.] **yeah, .. so, I suppose it**  
58 **depends how you define being polite, [really.]**  
59 Marie: [(H) yeah (H).]  
60 Heather: **in a way.**  
61 Marie: **oh yeah, no I think you, er, i- ... what you say is true too, but**  
62 **^my way is different.**  
63 Heather: [so you would --]  
64 Marie: [and I ^do] ^hurt push people sometimes,  
65 Heather: [b-]

---

<sup>13</sup> perhaps

66 Marie: [AND] I'M not afraid of being pushed as well, so.  
 67 Heather: mm, [whereas probably --]  
 68 Marie: [°you know°.]  
 69 Heather: [yeah.]  
 70 Marie: [@]  
 71 Heather: **I wou- I -- in [that]**  
 72 Marie: [(???)]  
 73 Heather: **sense I would be different,**  
 74 Marie: mm,  
 75 Heather: **I think that ^is a cultural difference.**  
 76 Marie: yeah, well I ↑think it is a bit in the culture,  
 77 Heather: mm,  
 78 Marie: and I am a bit excessive in France as well, but I've seen that,  
 79 ^yes, it's different,  
 80 Heather: mm hm, =  
 81 Marie: = in here. you've got a lot -- ... yeah, ... being emotional  
 82 is -- you express emotion very differently than the way we do in  
 83 France, I'm not able to say ^how really,  
 84 Heather: [mm,]  
 85 Marie: [I] think I see that when I'll be back, [but]  
 86 Heather: [yeah,]  
 87 Marie: there is a big difference. mm.  
 88 Heather: yeah.

In answer to my question (lines 1-4), Marie answers promptly and decisively: *ah. to me, yes. definitely.* (line 5).<sup>14</sup> Heather disagrees in lines 6-10, using several typical indicators of a dispreferred response, such as truncated intonation units, pauses, hesitation markers and hedges: *erm, oh I don't know, it would depend. I don't -- think I could say absolutely. ... in in -- well it would depend....; erm ...* (1.5). The length of Heather's response is also important here, since as Ford, Fox, and Thompson (1996: 441) point out, disagreements require further talk from the initiator (cf. also Ken's lengthy disagreement turn in example (1) compared to Guillaume and Irène in example (2)).

Marie responds with *I -- I -- I was sure you would disagree with me.* in lines 11-12, and goes on to explain why people think the French are arrogant, and that she would rather that people were sincere to each other, which may be seen as not being polite (lines 12-17), although in her view being sincere *is* a way of being polite. Apart from four truncated intonation units (the first due to an overlap with Heather's previous utterance), Marie displays no other signs of hesitation or hedges when supporting her viewpoint (in contrast to example (1) lines 1-5, where Natalie expresses her opinion).

The fact that Marie states that Heather has disagreed with her is important. This statement comes very early on in their relationship and appears quite confronting in Australian English interactional style. This could be viewed by Heather as even more confronting due to the fact that Marie says that Heather has disagreed with her, rather than the other way around, or instead of something inclusive like *I was sure we would disagree*. However, I would argue that this is actually intended as an example of positive politeness here; Marie - who later indicates that she is someone who approves of always expressing one's

<sup>14</sup> Marie's quick response in answer to my question is similar to that of Irène's in example (2). These examples are in marked contrast to example (1), where when I posed the question *What don't you like about Australia?* There was a pause of 3.5 seconds before someone (Natalie) answered.



opinion, since she does it herself - is pointing out (approvingly) that it is Heather who has exercised her right to disagree and express her opinion, rather than taking credit for a joint disagreement.

Heather's next turn includes a brief acknowledgement of Marie's point of view: *yeah*. (line 37). She then explains that she would rather be polite than tell someone what she really thinks if that might hurt them, and if it is not important (lines 37-57). Heather defends her reasoning for being "our version of polite", offering a compromise with *it depends how you define being polite, really* (lines 57-58), and adds another hedge *in a way* in line 60. In addition to a few pauses and other hedges in this section, we also see three instances of rising intonation (lines 37, 44 and 51). Rising intonation is generally considered to indicate uncertainty or deference to one's interlocutor, although Guy et al. (1986) claim that in fact it has a more interactive function - that of checking for listener comprehension and soliciting feedback. In either case, it can be considered a negative politeness strategy, and therefore consistent with expressing a dispreferred response in English.

Marie does mitigate her disagreement with Heather in lines 61-62, by acknowledging Heather's point, and then stating clearly that "[her] way is different". However, Marie's use of *too* in line 61 appears to diminish the mitigation somewhat by suggesting that Heather's opinion is inferior to hers: Marie's way is the right one, but Heather is entitled to think differently if she wishes. (Note in this section the importance for Heather of not offending one's interlocutor, while for Marie, sincerity is what is paramount.)

Heather disagrees in lines 71-73 (note the two instances of self-repair), saying that she would be different and in line 75; *I think that is a cultural difference, I think* is primarily acting as a face-saving device - both for the speaker and addressee - and is an example of a negative politeness strategy. Heather could be accounting for their "differences" by putting it down to culture rather than personality, thereby saving Marie's face (although I would argue that this was not a face-threatening situation for Marie as a French speaker). By suggesting in a way that this difference is through no fault of their own, Heather has relieved them both of the responsibility of not seeing eye to eye. At the same time she can save her own face in another way, by defending her reason for thinking differently - and for being "our version of polite" (lines 52-53). It seems that this line of defence was initiated here already, and that Heather was able to return to this later to sum up her opinion with this face-saving comment. It is interesting that Marie agrees with this statement on the whole (and in fact echoes Heather's *I think* in line 76), but is also happy to point out that she is "a bit excessive in France" (line 78) - this is evidence for my argument that Marie did not find this a face-threatening situation.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Les Anglais n'aiment pas la confrontation, ils feront tout pour arriver à un compromis. Les Français n'aiment pas le compromis, ils feront tout pour arriver à la confrontation. Dans l'esprit français, compromis signifie compromission. Le compromis est un aveu d'échec .... Rien n'est plus contraire à la psychologie nationale des Anglais : à leurs yeux, le compromis est le signe même d'une société civilisée.*

(Roudaut 2004: 320)

In this paper I have briefly outlined Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of face threatening acts, as well as the concept of preference in Conversation Analysis, and argued that neither of these can be applied to disagreements universally. Through the analysis of excerpts of natural data, I have shown how the management of disagreements differ in French and Australian English interaction; it was argued that disagreements cannot be considered dispreferred responses (CA) or face threatening acts (Brown and Levinson) in the same way for French and Australian English speakers.

We also saw how disagreements are more acceptable and more frequent in French interactional style. French speakers do not see disagreements as personal criticism, and disagreements can therefore occur as unmitigated in interaction, or only partially mitigated, while for Australian English speakers, the notion of harmony is usually paramount, and unmitigated disagreements are far less frequent in interaction between relative strangers. For French speakers expressing one's opinion is valued to the extent that differing opinions are accepted and welcomed; disagreeing affirms relationships for French speakers, and the notion of exchange is paramount to French interactional style.

Indeed, at the end of one of the presentations at this conference, there occurred the following exchange:

Questioner: *Je suis content et convaincu de ..... mais je suis en désaccord total avec votre conclusion .....*

Presenter: *Je suis ravie du désaccord .....*

While the questioner did first acknowledge the presenter's opinion, the use of "*désaccord total*" is less likely to have occurred in an Australian English interaction where the interlocutors did not know each other well, if at all (cf. the formal second person address form). Or, if it had occurred, it is less likely that the presenter would have expressed delight!

It is hoped that the ideas presented in this paper will contribute to the current theoretical and methodological debates surrounding cross-cultural communication and interlanguage pragmatics, since managing disagreements is an integral part of successful inter-cultural communication. The principles of this implication can of course also be extended to other contexts, such as the field of language teaching, since understanding interactional style is inseparable from learning the language and core values of any culture.

## Transcription Conventions

(based on Du Bois et al. 1992, 1993; Jefferson 1994)

.	final intonation contour
,	continuing intonation contour
?	appeal intonation contour
↓	falling pitch
↑	rising pitch
--	truncated intonation unit
wou-	truncated word
[ ]	overlapping speech
=	latching speech
LOUD	increased volume
°soft voice°	reduced volume
^	primary accent
(H)	inhalation
(Hx)	exhalation
..	break in rhythm (0.2 seconds or less)
...	short untimed pause (0.3 to 0.9 seconds)
... (1.0)	time intervals over 0.9 seconds
.....	extraneous data / quotation omitted
the::n	lengthened sound or syllable
????	unclear or inaudible speech
!	exclamation (high rising pitch)
@ @	laughter
{ }	researcher's comments (to provide more context or background information useful to the reader)

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